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Bleak Food: William Wilde, Famine, and Gastronomy

by Helen O'Connell

Abstract

Gastronomy might appear to be an unlikely context for any consideration of William Wilde's well-known 1854 essay, "The Food of the Irish". After all, that essay is primarily preoccupied by the recent Famine and the presumed absence of any culinary skill amongst the pre-Famine population. The essay itself depicts the pre-Famine Irish as stubbornly subsisting on a monotonous and restrictive diet of potatoes in ways that supposedly typify a generally backward condition. However, gastronomy is a crucial context for understanding Wilde's reflections on food and famine in the 1850s. Through allusion to a range of French and English gastronomic texts, Wilde suggests that the existence in Ireland of elaborate and developed culinary techniques—of gastronomy—would have provided an effective defence against the threat of Famine. Fully acknowledging that the potato-eating poor of the pre-Famine period were joyful and strong in a manner that would be impossible in post-Famine dietary conditions, Wilde links nourishment with backwardness. By exploring Wilde's "The Food of the Irish" in the context of his work on the 1851 Census, it becomes apparent that progress gets positively equated in his work with a malnourishing gastronomy and perpetual dissatisfaction.

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For the 1851 Irish census commissioner, statistician, surgeon, and antiquarian, William Wilde, famine was to be expected—it should even be considered an inevitability—in a country in which cooking had historically amounted to the mere roasting or boiling of potatoes. Indeed, in Wilde's analysis in his 1854 essay, "The Food of the Irish," the outbreak

of famine in Ireland was partly attributable to the absence of an Irish cuisine, or gastronomy. In his thinking, famine was unimaginable in those cultures that possessed sophisticated gastronomic conventions and traditions and where potatoes appeared on the table “*a la maitre d’hotel*” or “*a la crème*” or as “*pommes de terre au lard*.”¹ Wilde complains that the Catholic majority of pre-Famine Ireland possessed no such body of culinary knowledge, effectively subsisting on what he claims was raw or, at best, partially cooked food that was generally devoid of cultural mediation and embellishment. In his view, Ireland did not possess an effective culinary bulwark against the threat of famine, which could, he contended, have been effectively offset by means of gastronomic elaboration.

Father of the author Oscar Wilde and husband of the nationalist writer Jane “Speranza” Wilde, William Wilde combined his thriving practice as an ophthalmologist with antiquarian research, editing the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*, and membership of the Dublin Statistical Society. It was Wilde’s statistical capabilities and medical knowledge that equipped him for his work on the census, first in 1841, when, according to Peter Gray, he had responsibility for “tabulating and interpreting mortality and medical matters,” and again in 1851, when he “played a disproportionate role” in the project as a whole.² Wilde sought recognition for the extent of his labour on the 1851 census by having himself officially recognized as “the report’s leading author,” an accolade he finally achieved in 1857.³ His labours on the census culminated not only in the *General Report*, but also in the creation of the *Tables of Deaths* (the fifth volume of the published census report), which is one of the most comprehensive records of disease and mortality produced anywhere in the nineteenth century, and includes, among other things, a historical narrative of famine, disease, and related environmental factors entitled the “Table of Cosmical Phenomena, Epizootics, Epiphitics, Famines, and Pestilences, in Ireland.”⁴ This cyclical narrative of Irish history depicts endlessly repeating patterns of abundance, scarcity and famine throughout the

course of Irish history. Shaped by his own antiquarian interests and the scholarly contributions of John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry, this historical account formally demonstrates the impossibility of achieving progress in pre-Famine conditions of hand-to-mouth potato cultivation and consumption. Indeed, Wilde suggests that the Famine of 1845 was the most recent—and seemingly final—occurrence in a series of such environmental disasters throughout the course of Irish history.⁵ The Famine of 1845 was thus, according to Wilde, the ultimate manifestation of a destructive historical pattern and the point at which Ireland escaped, in Gray's terms, from a "cyclical pattern into one of linear advance."⁶ The year 1845 was thus a transition point between cyclical history and linear history.

Wilde's work on the census coincided with his writing and publication of the antiquarian *Irish Popular Superstitions* in 1852 and "The Food of the Irish" in 1854, the latter an instance of Irish "food studies" *avant la lettre*.⁷ When read in the broader contexts of Wilde's general report for the 1851 census and his antiquarian work, "The Food of the Irish" reveals surprising aspects of mid-nineteenth-century Whig thinking about the relationship between diet and modernity, or the body and progress. "The Food of the Irish" merits sustained analysis for its explicit and seemingly illogical equating of malnourishment with civility, progress, and, in fact, gastronomy, which Wilde equates with both "manners" and "morals."⁸ In his defence of malnourishment, Wilde challenges twentieth- and twenty-first-century scientific and cultural orthodoxy about diet, what Roland Barthes has termed "nutritional consciousness," which roots social and economic progress in the widespread consumption of nutritious food.⁹ In Wilde's provocative account, it is the poorly nourished body, as opposed to the sated one, that is the harbinger of economic development and, not least, the gastronomic cuisine that accompanies it. Those with fine palates, who desire "*pommes a la crème*" rather than roasted or boiled potatoes, have achieved refinement and are properly "modern." Wilde proceeds on the assumption that the food of the pre-Famine

poor carried what Barthes would much later describe as “a system of communication” while also evidently constituting “an immediate reality.”¹⁰ In the process, Wilde produces a semiotic analysis of pre-Famine diet, which generates a striking and counter-intuitive argument about the role of malnourishment in the development of capitalism. Wilde’s analytical history of Irish potato consumption foregrounds the social, economic, and political difficulties generated by ample or even sufficient nourishment. Paradoxically, Wilde is strikingly keen to emphasize the value, even necessity, to modernity of poor nourishment and is notably worried by the economic and conceptual fallout of everyone having too much, or even enough, good food to eat. Wilde thus condemns the potato for its nutritional excess and remarkable ability to sustain and continually propel communities in well-being, happiness, strength, and fertility. In his thinking, the rural poor did not suffer in the least from a lack of nutrition, but instead from too much potato-based nourishment and fullness.

By Wilde’s gastronomic standards, the potato-consuming poor essentially subsisted on raw food, their roasted and boiled potatoes failing to qualify as cooked fare. The act of cooking, for Wilde, extended far beyond the supposedly primitive techniques of mere roasting and boiling, encompassing extended culinary codes and procedures. The “raw” potato diet of the rural poor might nurture contentment, but such well-being was at odds with the sadder and weaker—if more civilized—conditions of modern life. According to the logic of “The Food of the Irish,” a gastronomic palate will necessarily accompany a more enfeebled physical state and melancholic or complex disposition. Gastronomy provides one of the most striking reference points in the essay, which alludes directly to some key gastronomic texts and dishes, such as Alexandre Grimod’s *Almanach des Gourmands* (1803–12) and William Kitchener’s *The Cook’s Oracle* (1817). Wilde’s emphasis on gustatory taste in his analysis of Irish diet—his decrying of the perceived absence of refined taste amongst the rural poor—demonstrates that the antiquarian and scientific methodologies deployed in

his essay are complemented by the now more obscure nineteenth-century discipline of gastronomy.¹¹

“The Food of the Irish” is both thematically and argumentatively borne out of Wilde’s labours on the census, typifying the particular methodological combination of antiquarianism and science that stimulated much of his research and writing throughout the 1850s. The work of the antiquarian and that of the Whig census commissioner might appear to contradict each other, the former associated with belief in a golden age and nostalgia, the latter with rationality and progress; however, they are entirely at one for Wilde. From Wilde’s perspective, science and antiquarianism are allied, even inter-related, disciplines in a post-Famine context, the truths of the one complementing and enforcing those of the other. Notably, Wilde’s antiquarianism is itself of a particular Whig variety; his *Irish Popular Superstitions* comprehensively records various superstitions in the assumption that such beliefs, and the Catholicism with which they are associated, are largely being displaced by rational knowledge. The particular mode in which Wilde was writing was propelled by two seemingly distinct yet related motivations: to record and to obliterate pre-Famine Irish culture. It can be argued that Irish Whig identity relied on the historicizing and recording of a backward Ireland in order of course to define and articulate its own project, but also in an attempt to affirm its status in the context of the reforms and agitations of the nineteenth century. Wilde assumes that progress has at last won out over the backwardness of the Catholic poor. From the perspective of the demographic statistics at Wilde’s fingertips in the 1850s, it may well have appeared certain that the values of Irish Protestant Whig culture were to dominate in the post-Famine years, the status of a Protestant minority ideologically and also perhaps statistically protected. For Wilde, such values inhered in the cooked and progressive nature of that culture, which had always been at odds with the generally raw status of Catholic Ireland. “The Food of the Irish” was a logical, if not obvious, extension of

Wilde's work on superstition, as the potato culture of the rural poor was understood to be integral to belief in fairies, holy wells, and banshees; indeed, the eating of boiled or roasted potatoes was a material manifestation of such superstition. Wilde's depiction of superstition betrays little nostalgia for the loss of this body of lore—or for the potato consumption that fed it—from the everyday life of the post-Famine poor. In fact, this loss is welcomed as paving the way for the much needed development of bleakly modern conditions.

Wilde was by no means alone in denigrating the potato, which was widely perceived in Britain to be a degraded and primitive food.¹² For earlier commentators such as Thomas Malthus and Charles Trevelyan, the evident problem with roasted and boiled potatoes was that they were the perpetuating force of a lower-class, Catholic primitivism.¹³ Wilde's "The Food of the Irish" certainly subscribes to a Malthusian analysis of famine as a positive check on demographic pressures.¹⁴ Malthus also famously worried about the effects of the powerfully nourishing potato, but, unlike Wilde, he did not foreground the progressive value of nutritional weakness. Nor does Malthus conceive of food in gastronomic terms; instead, for him, food retains continuity with a nature that, in terms of either scarcity or abundance, is always opposed to culture.¹⁵ At the same time, contrary to both Malthus and Wilde, Trevelyan denies the nutritional value of potatoes entirely and claims that they provided inadequate nourishment by comparison with "higher" foods such as wheat. That insufficiency was fully evident in the physically weakened condition of Irish labourers, who, Trevelyan claims, were incapable of enduring the demands of modern labour. Trevelyan argues that progress relied entirely on the amply nourished bodies of wheat-consumers and nowhere acknowledges the possibility or desirability of malnourished progress.¹⁶

Wilde notably argues against nourishment as the basis of social and economic development, associating a condition of partial nourishment, or even malnourishment, with modern civility. In Wilde's thinking, the well-fed body constituted an impediment to

economic progress, and, indeed, social and political stability. In fact, throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Ireland became the principal example of well-fed, or nourished, backwardness, the prime instance of sated non-docility and associated rebelliousness. The pre-Famine poor were bodily satisfied, but by no means “docile” in Michel Foucault’s now famous depiction of the disciplined body of modern industrializing culture.¹⁷ Far from the nourishment of potatoes instilling the kind of discipline that would facilitate “improvement”—as had been assumed by various Irish reformers in the immediate post-Union period¹⁸—Wilde argues that such sustenance counteracted docility. He claims that “the potato was, alas! admirably suited to the genius of the Irish people—lazy, indolent, prolific, and rebellious against all intrusion upon their domain.”¹⁹ The well-fed bodies of pre-Famine Ireland might have been perceived as “lazy” or “indolent”—and thereby disinclined to participate in particular forms of economic activity—but that by no means indicated docility. Indeed, such well-fed laziness underpinned a rebelliousness against any incursion upon a Catholic and potato-eating way of life. Potato consumption thus insulated the people from the progress of civilization, preserving them within what Wilde terms “their domain” of backwardness. In this, Wilde echoes that other pronounced anti-potato polemicist, Trevelyan, who declared in *The Irish Crisis* that potato consumption preserved the rural poor in “a state of isolation” from the civilizing and progressive processes of bread consumption.²⁰ From Wilde’s perspective, it was all too clear that the docility of the Irish masses—or of any other social group—could never be achieved by means of bodily nourishment, but only on the back of partial hunger and desire of a particularly modern variety. Barthes has commented on how “the energy furnished by a consciously worked out diet is mythically directed ... toward an adaptation of man to the modern world.”²¹ Wilde claims that potatoes could not perform that role of adaptation and had been shown to undermine it entirely. That task had, however, been achieved in part by the Famine, which, Wilde claims, brought an end to the bodily fulfilment,

or nourished completion, of pre-Famine society. The effects of starvation and emigration induced a sexual as well as alimentary condition of semi-deprivation that would endure well beyond the period of the Famine itself in the greatly reduced birth rate and marked decline in potato consumption of the mid to late nineteenth century.²²

Of course Wilde was not advocating a condition of starvation. But he did advocate the necessity of a continual condition of partial hunger, or dissatisfaction, as a stimulus for ambition and progress. In Wilde's account, economic development produces, and is produced by, welcomingly malnourishing conditions, which are generally—and for him positively—devoid of the possibility of contentment. The achievement of progress entails moving beyond a primitive joyfulness or pre-modern innocence into a sober, anxious, and forever incomplete state. Wilde was certainly not unusual in such thinking; a condition of weak or partial nourishment had long been implicitly associated with processes of economic development and, in more recent times, the industrial revolution.²³ But he is unusual in stating the argument as explicitly and unapologetically as he does. The decline from the perceived nutritional completeness of—for example—wholegrains or potatoes to the “emptiness” of white bread had been lamented by various reformers, such as John Coakley Lettsom and Arthur Young, who had failed, or struggled, to accept the supposedly necessary associations between malnourishment and the progress of civilization.²⁴ The arguments of a Young or a Lettsom are of course closer to twenty-first-century nutritional orthodoxies and thus now appear to be rational responses to the dietary changes, and related processes of commercialization, of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For others, such as Wilde, these malnourishing conditions were implicitly accepted and even relished as the true state, even taste, of civility.

In Ireland, such civility could only be achieved on the back of mass starvation and emigration. In his *General Report* on the 1851 census, Wilde “beg[s] to call attention to the

extraordinary decrease in the *rural* population, which resulted from the famine and emigration of 1845 and following years.”²⁵ The number of this “extraordinary decrease” is 1,622,739, which is calculated as approximately 19.85 percent of the population and which, he claims, “conveys but very inadequately the effect of the visitation of famine and pestilence, with which it pleased an all-wise Providence to visit Ireland.”²⁶ Invoking the terminology and ideology of famine as providential, demographic analysis is placed in the context of the prevailing Whig explanation of the catastrophe. In fact, Trevelyan’s infamous Whig analysis in *The Irish Crisis*, which depicted the Famine as “a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence,” is echoed throughout the *General Report*.²⁷ There might be little or no flinching from the demographic starkness of the effects of famine, but, for Wilde, it had largely been a positively providential event. Indeed, the positive effects of famine were already manifesting themselves in the pleasingly modernizing Ireland of the post-Famine 1850s. The figures might point to the “extraordinary” number of people who lost their lives throughout the period of famine, but, for Wilde, they nonetheless fail to register the profound social, economic, and political impact of such a sustained period of hunger and disease. The report records that on the whole “the loss of population between 1841 and 1851 may be computed at the enormous amount of 2,466,414 persons.”²⁸ This sharp decline primarily affected potato-eaters, “the lower classes ... among whom famine and disease, in all such calamitous visitations, ever make the greatest ravages.”²⁹ The use of such adjectives as “extraordinary” and “enormous” would suggest that the Famine was an unusual or unexpected event, rather than—according to the logic of the 1851 census commentary—a manifestation in a predictably cyclical pattern of abundance and scarcity. However, this most recent famine was peculiar in being especially and ultimately devastating in its ravaging of an entire social class and way of life. Ironically, it was courtesy of famine that the cyclical time of Irish life had, according to Wilde, finally been disrupted, allowing for the penetration by

progress, and the subsequent smashing, of the traditional “domain” of the Catholic poor.³⁰

Famine was, according to Wilde, unthinkable in fully modernized and gastronomic conditions, those now increasingly, if bleakly, inhabited by the remaining inhabitants of rural Ireland.

The *General Report* does not express remorse at the statistical and demographic reality that registered itself in 1851, or at having to reckon with such a severe demographic decline. Notes of regret are quickly balanced by assertions of the great political and economic benefits to be obtained from the radical loss of the very poorest.³¹ In fact, the report is eager to call attention to, and insist upon, the benefits of such a sustained period of starvation, disease and emigration:

But, notwithstanding our sudden depopulation, we have every cause for thankfulness that years of suffering have been followed by years of prosperity; for Ireland has increased in wealth and progressed in the development of her resources; as it appears that in the 1851 the extent of land under cultivation, the value of agricultural stock and crops, and the proportionate number of educated among the people, were greater than at any previous period of which we have a record.³²

The “depopulation” of the countryside corresponded with general economic progress, by which is meant the achievement of more cultivated land, the increased production of valuable cash crops, and a higher number of educated “persons” in place of illiterate potato-eating labourers. By 1851, all the signs of a developing capitalist society were in existence, in notable contrast to the supposedly static economy of the pre-Famine period. The articulation of such an analysis was an endorsement of the anti-protectionist, or free trade, policies of the British administration, the positive results of which were manifesting themselves in progressive post-Famine conditions.³³

The commissioners also calculated that there had been a considerable decrease of so-called “fourth-class houses,” those habitations of the very poorest, which were “chiefly mud cabins” and where most of Ireland’s hand-to-mouth potato consumption occurred.³⁴ The very existence of such an architectural “fourth class” implies that there was also a demographic fourth class that inhabited such properties, a category of people that had been lingering at the very base of society. In place of all those mud-walled “fourth-class dwellings” that dotted the pre-Famine countryside, there had been “an increase” in the number of “habitations in the first class”—up to 10,084. Such “habitations” were made of stone, not mud, and boasted chimneys and windows. Many survivors of the Famine had effectively bypassed inhabitation of second- and third-class dwellings and corresponding dietary states of being, benefitting from an accelerated form of social mobility right up into the “first class.” These people escaped from the most degraded of social classes into more respectable bread-consuming conditions. First-class status was achieved in part by means of consumption of cooked food, as opposed to fourth-class tendencies towards the eating of simply boiled or roasted potatoes.

In the terms of the *General Report*, the death and loss of so many millions of people was supposed to be compensated for by the ultimately satisfactory outcome of famine: “the advancement of the population in education, in the enjoyment of better house accommodation, and in the proportion not dependent on manual labour for support, has been most satisfactory between 1841 and 1851, notwithstanding the great diminution of the people, caused by famine and emigration.”³⁵ The report then concludes on this same sense of satisfaction in the outcome ultimately achieved, stating that it should be “gratifying” to the British administration that “although the population has been diminished in so remarkable a manner by famine, disease, and emigration” in just ten years, “and has been since decreasing,” Ireland had become a prosperous country in ways that seemed entirely unachievable in the pre-Famine period. It took the “remarkable” work of famine to achieve

such generally pleasing results, which are, we are told, “on the whole, so satisfactory, demonstrating as they do, the general advancement of the country.”³⁶ Advancement of the country is here equated with less raw-potato eating and fourth-class-house dwelling and more cooked inhabitation of first-class properties. The benefits of famine are summarized as a general diminishment of deplorable pre-Famine conditions; hence, there is more land under cultivation, “the worst class of houses” have been replaced by superior structures, and as “the education of the people has favourably progressed,” fewer are compelled to work as manual labourers.”³⁷ Implicit in such a conclusion is of course the claim that an entire—indeed, “the worst”—social class has been lost. The statistics of starvation, disease, and emigration are left to stand quite bluntly and there is little effort to obfuscate them in any way. Instead, effort is expended in placing those numbers in service of the then prevalent Whig and political-economic argument that the Famine was an entirely necessary event, one that has produced “advancement” beyond a stifling repetition into the presumed release and freedom of linearity. In that way, these statistics can be transformed from pointing to a deeply negative and disturbing state of affairs into a positive account of the ability of progress to take root and, in fact, instantly propel itself, as a result of catastrophic demographic depletion.

It is certain from the outset that Wilde’s subject matter in “The Food of the Irish” is not the diet of the upper classes or the Protestant ascendancy. Wilde is centrally preoccupied by the food and indeed the taste of the rural and Catholic poor in particular, the very “fourth-class” people who had been devastated by the Famine and thus, from his statistical perspective, no longer constituted a social category. Now greatly weakened and dispersed, the remnants of this class could not represent for Wilde the kind of political and existential threat they once did. The tone of the essay shifts register frequently from parody—in fact lampooning—to a more serious historical tone, which generates some ambiguity and unevenness throughout. But that unevenness does not obscure the serious argument at the

heart of the essay, which remains consistent with the *General Report*. Wilde also adopts a clear historical framework for structuring the essay, which is based on the assumption that the pre-Famine period is sharply distinguishable from the post-Famine years: the former characterized by potato-eating backwardness in a mud-walled cabin and the latter by the consumption of cooked food in a respectable stone house. The lengthy span of time prior to 1845 was determined, for Wilde, by the culturally raw forces of superstition, Catholicism, and potatoes. As such, his post-Famine analysis discounts the fact that, as Louis Cullen states, the “Irish diet had been in a continuing evolution during the two preceding centuries.”³⁸

Keen to emphasize from the outset the ways in which diet and food signify the condition or historical stage of a culture, Wilde identifies exceptions to one of those foundational rules of civilization: that “man” is “a cooking” animal, as opposed to a non-cooking one. He cites “the Greenlander,” “the Esquimaux,” and “some of the dwellers of the Andes” as all exceptions to this anthropological rule.³⁹ These groups, while clearly human, do not, according to Wilde, perform the ultimately humanizing task of cooking their food, instead preferring to eat “raw whale blubber,” “horse flesh,” and “dry unsalted reindeer.”⁴⁰ In fact, the culinary habits and dispositions of these allegedly non-cooking humans, while flouting necessary distinctions between the savage and the civilized, human and animal, and the raw and the cooked, exemplify their particular state of non-civilization. However, as they inhabit overwhelmingly pre-modern conditions in general, Greenlanders, Esquimaux, and the dwellers of the Andes can, in Wilde’s view, be excused for not having progressed to cooking the flesh of whales, horses, and reindeers before eating it. But such a rationalization does not exist for the situation of “the modern Irish,” those extraordinary non-cooking humans, who, “compared with other nations in a similar state of advancement in all other respects, were, and perhaps are, the most uneducated in the culinary art of any people under the sun.”⁴¹

Trevelyan had similarly complained about the culinary ignorance of the great mass of the

Irish population, decrying how “exclusively living on this root [the potato] produced an entire ignorance of every other food and of the means of preparing it.” Such limitation, Trevelyan claims, ensures that “the culinary art” of most women “of the peasant class in the West of Ireland” “scarcely ... exceeds the boiling of a potato”; consequently, “bread is scarcely ever seen and an oven is unknown.”⁴² Without citing the absence of gastronomy as a factor in propelling the Famine, Trevelyan does suggest that culinary artistry would have served as an alimentary defence against its onslaught. Wilde is also keen to emphasize the peculiar modernity of the Irish, distinguishing them from both the evident primitivism of the Esquimaux and the evident modernity of other nations, which made their non-cooking condition—and general anomalousness—all the more notable and, indeed, inexcusable. In categorizing the pre-Famine and Famine poor as modern yet simultaneously backward, Wilde was calling attention to Ireland’s difficult position within an advanced industrial and cooking society (that of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland).

Wilde suggests that the simple potato diet of the rural poor exists on the same uncivilized level as superstition and Catholicism and cannot be brought into the modern mainstream. In this he departs from some earlier nineteenth-century discussions of Irish diet which sought to encompass the reality of Irish potato cuisine in a generally liberal project of progressive reform. The most practically minded of such pre-Famine Irish reformers—Abigail Roberts and Mary Leadbeater, for example—had viewed potato consumption as central to the achievement of economic and social improvement. These early nineteenth-century reformers, or improvers, largely dismissed Malthusian potato anxieties, insisting that in Irish conditions potatoes provided the most stable material basis on which to establish a progressive, non-Catholic society.⁴³ For “improvers,” the potato functioned ideologically to achieve and complete the Act of Union. From another perspective, one that sought to align post-Union Ireland with the Whig mainstream, Lady Morgan shows in her novels, *O’Donnel*

(1814), Florence Maccarthy (1818), and *The O'Briens and the O'Flaherties* (1827), how appreciation of Irish potatoes as a signifier of a latent refinement could help to create a polished and cosmopolitan society that would unite Catholic and Protestant, past and present, man and woman, landlord and tenant, Ireland and England. Her work as a whole suggests that a plate of Irish potatoes could be thought of as the essence of gastronomic sophistication, categorizable alongside the dishes of such French chefs as Antoine Careme and Antoine Beauvilliers, which were consumed by Morgan in Paris in 1816 and 1829 respectively.⁴⁴ Lady Morgan thus anticipated twenty-first-century culinary claims for the inherently gastronomic nature of “peasant” food, which now—in a vein that is notably contrary to Wilde—even encompasses traditional Irish food. For example, Trish Deseine’s recent Paris-published cookbook, *Home: Recipes from Ireland*, makes several claims for the inherently gastronomic qualities of such foods as Irish salted butter, beef, and, not least, potatoes.⁴⁵ Indeed, Deseine’s book can be seen as an antidote to Wilde’s “The Food of the Irish” in its claim for the continued existence of an Irish haute cuisine.

Wilde describes the extent of Irish culinary skill, which consists of dressing potatoes, boiling or roasting eggs, turning “oatmeal into bread or stirabout” and making butter.⁴⁶ Lacking any knowledge of “kitchen chemistry,” the Irish “peasant” was fated to subsist upon the most limited of diets, relieved infrequently by such “rare luxuries” as “Dutch Cabbage and scallions, dillisk, and some few sea weeds.”⁴⁷ For those who inhabited coastal regions, greater variety existed in the form of “coarse fish, limpids, whelks” and such that could be used as so-called “kitchen for the dry potatoe.”⁴⁸ But “the great bulk of the peasantry” are, Wilde states, limited almost wholly to the consumption of dressed eggs and potatoes, which, in his view, cannot be properly categorized as cooked food. Despite the fact that the potatoes are either roasted or boiled, and thus definitively cooked, they somehow still fall short of achieving such a condition in Wilde’s terms. Nor does the dressing of them by the addition of

some butter or milk elevate their status from that of the raw into that of the cooked. In general terms, for Wilde, the practice of boiling, roasting, and “dressing” food by no means approximates the civilizing effects achievable by modern cooking, or gastronomy, which for him seems to entail a far more sustained process of culinary transformation and embellishment. This process is deeply grounded in culture, requiring utensils and implements for the preparation, cooking, serving, and consumption of food. The incivility of the Irish potato diet was, for Wilde, further compounded by the food being routinely placed upon a stool “around which the family, including the pig, arranged themselves” in order to dip the potatoes into “the saucer of ‘point,’ to give it a relish.”⁴⁹ To worsen matters, “in lieu of a tablecloth, napkin or finger glass, the back of the hand rubbed across the mouth” completed the ritual.⁵⁰ It was in such a manner that the pre-Famine diet retained and even deepened the naturalness of potatoes, which were insulated from the crucial mediating and thereby transformative effects of culture. In being insulated, or, as Trevelyan might argue, isolated, from such forms of cultural mediation, pre-Famine potato eaters existed outside of “the civilising process” (in Norbert Elias’s terms). For Elias, as for Wilde, such a process was marked by various objects that mediated between the preparation and consumption of food.⁵¹ The great bulk of the peasantry who consume this largely unmediated food, which is at best simply cooked and dressed, are of course themselves unable to make the transition from a stage of barbarity into reformed civility. Wilde decries the uncooked ways of the Catholic poor and their rejection of the particular “civilizing process” of cookery and all that underpins it.

In addition to the practice of “dressing” potatoes with, for example, butter or milk, Wilde informs us that there existed the custom of “kitchen,” which he curiously defines as “Hibernice, analaun, i.e. *obsonium*,” a term that “is applied to all condiments.” He provides various examples of “kitchen” such as how “in the southeast, the people composed a kitchen

of eggs and water, called ‘the milk of the cow of the roost’; or the one produced by “scallions or onions, and milk; cabbage and dripping, or lard ...”⁵² But “kitchen” could, Wilde claims, even be achieved on the scarcest, not to mention unlikeliest, of resources, such as “the ‘stags,’ or old potatoes of the previous year, which had become sweetened by frost.” The application of such condiments to potatoes produced the so-called “potatoes and point,” a “luxury” food that entailed the addition to the potato of “anything so used as a condiment, but more particularly the head of a herring with salt, bruised into the bottom of a plate or small wooden cup, and sometimes called ‘blind herring,’ or a little kitchen-stuff, or even salt, pepper, and water.”⁵³ Such culinary resourcefulness, which was stimulated by scarcity and might now be celebrated for its authenticity and thus implicit gastronomic integrity (as well as—perhaps—environmental “sustainability”), is instead depicted here as degraded.

Restating that “the majority of people lived upon the potato, without any other condiment than salt, or such kitchen as ... described,” Wilde provides a comparative account of the various ways in which potatoes are cooked in English, French, and German cuisines. He explains how the poor of Ireland do not dress their potatoes “*a la maître d’hotel*,” with white sauce and chopped parsley, or “*a la crème*,” with fresh butter, nutmeg, and lemon, or as “*pommes de terre au lard*,” with bacon and sweet herbs “after the manner of the French.”⁵⁴ Potatoes are rendered thoroughly acceptable as food—are elevated to the heights of haute cuisine—when so thoroughly cooked and served in French gastronomic terms. In both Britain and Germany, potatoes are also elevated well above rawness by the various conventions of their respective potato cuisines, which produce well-cooked and commendably civilized servings of the tuber in various guises. Indeed, in sticking resolutely to either boiling or roasting their potatoes, the Irish lag well behind the cooked sophistication of British and continental potato cuisine—as well as gastronomy—more generally. It should be noted that,

for Wilde, the problem was less with the potato itself as a foodstuff than with the manner in which it had been historically prepared and eaten in Ireland.

The potato culture of the rural poor was, according to Wilde, deeply and stubbornly entrenched and unsusceptible to any modernizing or civilizing influences from the outside. That imperviousness was the main factor in both propelling famine and in the ruthlessness of its effects. Even when migratory Irish labourers were introduced to a “taste of” the thoroughly cooked “roast beef of Old England”—“smoking sirloin, which, with salt and potatoes was served to them in plenty” by their English employers—they were apparently not imbued with “any missionary enterprise” to introduce such evidently superior food to their own homes and communities upon return to Ireland.⁵⁵ In fact, Wilde informs us that, upon returning home, “the old system of living, with all its deficiencies of cooking, resumed.” The return to Ireland was marked by the happy resumption of dining on potatoes with salt, “or whatever kitchen could be procured,” a retreat to the domain of backward rawness.⁵⁶

Wilde emphasizes that, however raw or undercooked it might be, such a diet nourished rural labourers and their families, contributing to manly vigour and female voluptuousness and, consequently, to the ready reproduction of “pretty and abundant” children.⁵⁷ That level of nourished contentment was, for him, the principal difficulty with potato consumption. To the largely “raw” potato diet of the rural poor, Wilde links an entire culture of “rent-paying, pig-feeding, love-making, child-breeding, faction-fighting, and country-dancing.”⁵⁸ Such wholeness of body and spirit could never be replicated in weakened and potato-deprived post-Famine conditions. That happier potato-based society had by the mid-1850s been entirely supplanted by famine and the subsequent entrenching of a post-Famine grain- and bread-based diet. For Wilde, however, those high levels of pre-Famine vigour and voluptuousness had always been out of step with the necessarily weakening and dissatisfying conditions of the modern world. It is such despairing conditions that are

characteristic of a properly cooking and modernizing society, from which the potato-eating poor of Ireland had been insulated for too long.

Wilde's "The Food of the Irish" places the materiality of food at the centre of its analysis of pre-Famine society. However, Wilde's analysis points toward a desired displacing of such materiality and the achievement of a more abstract state of being. For Wilde, the potato had rendered Ireland overly material, even excessively bodily, which, in turn, had made progressive change almost impossible. Irish society had, Wilde claims, been entirely conditioned by and structured around the potato, abetting not just "minute sub-divisions of land," early marriages, and over-population, but the pre-Famine economy itself:

[The potato] paid agents, and drivers, and middlemen; it afforded fortunes (or promises thereof) to the spinsters, and jointures to innumerable aunts and dowagers; it furnished the bet for the race course, the stake for the gambling-table, the bill of costs for the attorney, and the interest for the mortgagee; and it "promised to pay" for the four-in-hand of "the young master"; it also furnished the *lan a waula*, the lashings and lavings for the hosts of poor relations, cleevins, fosterers, retainers, nurses, servants, gossoons, and hangers-on about the "big house."⁵⁹

But dependence on the potato was also "one of the chief causes" of a decidedly non-Whig "idleness, laziness, and want of agricultural skill and improvement," cheapening the value of labour and influencing "directly and indirectly, the whole social system of Ireland."⁶⁰ Indeed, it also went much further than this, reaching for more politically utopian alternatives to the existing system: according to Wilde, the potato had been a trouble-maker, the nurturer of the seminal political movement of the pre-Famine years, Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation. For Wilde, O'Connellite "agitation was fed by the potato" and the Liberator himself, "the big potato-faced agitator, as he was called in England, was, when in

health, and spirits and vigour, the very impersonation of a laughing lumper.”⁶¹ In being “the very impersonation” of the most lowly, yet most widely cultivated and consumed, of all Irish potato varieties in the immediate pre-Famine period, O’Connell embodied the essential characteristics of pre-Famine Ireland, physically bearing the degradation of Ireland’s uncooked state.

Wilde assumes that the Famine cut short O’Connell-style nationalism, the most recent manifestation of which was the Young Ireland rising of 1848. Nationalist ambitions were, Wilde claims, further undermined or rendered irrelevant by the fact that the Famine ushered in a complete restructuring of Irish society and economy so thorough that there could never be a return to the potato-based politics of old. He was by no means alone in making such a claim; Gray recounts that Lyon Playfair had written to Robert Peel in early November of 1845 that a Famine-induced shift from potatoes to wheat “would go a great way to improve” the “social and therefore ... political habits” that pertained in Ireland.⁶² Indeed, Wilde claims that the economic effects of Famine were far-reaching, even radical: the large-scale sale of land under the Encumbered Estates Court wiped out the older more colonial model—with its opposing yet mutually re-enforcing nationalist and Unionist antagonisms—and compelled the introduction of “free trade in land” into Ireland ahead even of its introduction to England. Agricultural productivity thereby increased since the Famine, encountering no such obstacle as an abundant and recalcitrant populace that could impede progressive development. However, opposition developed in other ways. Wilde incorrectly assumed that the Famine had decimated, as opposed to reawakening, Catholic-nationalist ambitions. As Gray has pointed out, the Famine, and the society that developed in its wake, stimulated nationalist activity in the foundation of the Fenians, the Land League, and the movement for Home Rule, all of which were to emerge from the late 1850s through to the 1870s.⁶³ Contrary to Wilde,

the kind of life underpinned and symbolized by bread and “*pommes a la crème*” could nurture a fierce rebelliousness as opposed to docility.

Wilde suggests that the seemingly joyful population of pre-Famine Ireland had to be urged forth into less satisfying, though more tasteful, conditions. This task had, he claims, been successfully, even remarkably, achieved by years of famine and associated emigration. Indeed, the Indian corn or maize that was imported into Ireland in 1845–46 as a substitute for the decimated potato was malnourishing; it has been claimed that the maize was “nutritionally poorer than the potato and dependency on it made people prone to vitamin-deficiency diseases.”⁶⁴ Subsistence on such maize would no doubt have deepened the general wretchedness of the people. The contented potato-eating poor had not, it seems, inhabited the necessarily bleak state of economic progress and were, as such, entirely out of step with those conventional historical processes that were shaping social and economic life in England, Scotland, and Wales. For Wilde, the pre-Famine poor anachronistically inhabited Edenic conditions of completion as all bodily needs were readily gratified within the very bounds of their own cabins and surrounding patches of ground. Such a people did not experience those sustained periods of craving and desire that supposedly generated economic activity, improvement, and (perhaps) psychological or novelistic complexity. As a result, the self-sustaining bodily economy of the poor protected them from the modern market and its related culinary as well as cultural forces.

Alert to the signifying qualities of diet, to the ways in which it constitutes “a system of communication,” Wilde takes the potato as the basis for his semiotic analysis of pre-Famine society in alimentary, political, and economic terms. That analysis provides a vehicle for the articulation of a particular claim against the value of nourishment in a modernizing and progressive society. Wilde associates happiness with a backward and pre-scientific past, as though the deficits of a less nourished and contented state of being can be compensated for

by fully developed scientific and medical disciplines as well as the taste of haute cuisine. In general terms, Wilde's "The Food of the Irish" is a valuable lens through which to interpret his more famous contributions to the 1851 census. It is evident from "The Food of the Irish" that Wilde's perspective on both the Famine and the history of Irish food was as informed by his own direct gustatory experiences of haute cuisine as it was by his statistical and medical knowledge. Indeed, Wilde's essay is itself "a system of communication," revealing the extent to which his own alimentary propensities and desires shaped his analysis of "the food of the Irish." There might nonetheless be another way of understanding Wilde's peculiar analysis of Irish diet: whether intended or not, his equating of a malnourished unhappiness with progress is in its own way a dystopian response to the devastation of the Famine. In the terms of such an analysis, the progress thus achieved on the back of famine is a very dark phenomenon indeed.

Acknowledgements

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¹ William Wilde, "The Food of the Irish," *Dublin University Magazine*, February 1854, 130.

² Peter Gray, "Accounting for Catastrophe: William Wilde, the 1851 Census and the Great Famine," in *Power and Popular Culture in Ireland: Essays in Honour of James S. Donnelly, Jr.*, ed. Michael de Nie and Sean Farrell (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 52–53. For other accounts of Wilde, see Peter Froggatt, "Sir William Wilde and the 1851 Census of Ireland," *Medical History* 9, no. 4 (1965): 302–27; James McGeachie, "Wilde's Worlds: Sir William Wilde in Victorian Ireland," *Irish Journal of Medical Science* 185, no. 2 (2016): 303–7; Laurence M. Geary, "William Wilde (1815–76) as Historian, A Bicentenary Appraisal," *History Ireland*, September/October 2015, 28–31.

³ Gray, “Accounting for Catastrophe,” 53.

⁴ *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851*, part 5, *Tables of Death*; part 6, *General Report* (Dublin: Queen’s Printer, 1856). See Gray, “Accounting for Catastrophe,” 57–58.

⁵ For a full analysis of this claim, which outlines “an alternative view,” see L. A. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland, 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–12.

⁶ Gray, “Accounting for Catastrophe,” 57.

⁷ W. R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (Dublin: James McGlashan, 1852).

⁸ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 141.

⁹ Barthes, “Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” reprinted in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed., Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 33.

¹⁰ Barthes, “Toward a Psychology,” 28.

¹¹ For full accounts of this development, see Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Denise Gigante, ed., *Gusto: Essential Writings in Nineteenth-Century Gastronomy* (London: Routledge, 2005); Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹² Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843–1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 104.

¹³ Thomas Malthus, *Essay on Principles of Population*, 2nd ed. (London: Joseph Johnson, 1803), 334–35, 574–79;

¹⁴ For discussion of the inapplicability of a Malthusian analysis in pre-Famine and Famine-period Ireland, see Joel Mokyr, “Malthusian Models and Irish History,” *Journal of Economic History* 40, no. 1 (1980): 159–66; Patrick P. L. McGregor, “Demographic Pressure and the

Irish Famine: Malthus after Mokyr,” *Land Economics* 65, no. 3 (1989): 228–38; Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800–1850* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983); Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69–74.

¹⁵ Thomas Malthus, *Essay on Principles of Population*, 2nd ed. (London: Joseph Johnson, 1803), 334–35, 574–79.

¹⁶ Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, 4–10. For a general discussion of how corn was perceived to be “high” and potatoes “debased,” see Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 104.

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 135–70.

¹⁸ On this theme, see Helen O’Connell, “‘At Our Potatoes’: Recipes for Normality in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” *Éire-Ireland* 48, no. 3/4 (2013): 49–78.

¹⁹ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 142.

²⁰ Trevelyan, *Irish Crisis*, 4.

²¹ Barthes, “Toward A Psychology,” 33.

²² For an account of these related themes, see Clarkson and Crawford, *Feast and Famine*, 88–111; Ian Miller, *Reforming Food in Post-Famine Ireland: Medicine, Science and Improvement, 1845–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

²³ Mintz has famously argued that sweetened tea suppressed appetite, which made it possible for workers to endure the long shifts in factories. See Sydney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Penguin, 1985)

²⁴ Examples of those who lamented the displacing of a traditional wholegrain or wholemeal diet with white bread and sweetened tea include Jonas Hanway, *An Essay on Tea: Considered as Pernicious to Health, Obstructing Industry and Impoverishing the Nation* (London: H. Woodfall and C. Henderson, 1757); John Coakley Lettsom, *The Natural History*

of the Tea Tree; with Observations on the Medical Qualities of Tea and Effects of Tea-Drinking (Dublin, 1772); Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland, 1776–1779* (London, 1780).

Louis Cullen notes that widespread potato consumption in pre-Famine Ireland was a response to “commercialisation,” pointing to the ways in which potato consumption was a manifestation of market pressures. See Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981), 171.

²⁵ *Census, General Report*, xiii. Emphasis in the original.

²⁶ *Census, General Report*, xiv–xv.

²⁷ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, 147.

²⁸ *Census, General Report*, xvi.

²⁹ *Census, General Report*, xvi.

³⁰ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 141.

³¹ For a sustained account of this topic, see David Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2011).

³² *Census, General Report*, xvi.

³³ For a thorough analysis of British policy in the period the Famine, see Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 95–141.

³⁴ *Census, General Report*, xxxvii.

³⁵ *Census, General Report*, xxxvii.

³⁶ *Census, General Report*, lviii.

³⁷ *Census, General Report*, lviii.

³⁸ Cullen, *Emergence of Modern Ireland*, 146.

³⁹ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127.

⁴⁰ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127.

⁴¹ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127.

⁴² Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, 6.

⁴³ On this topic, see O’Connell, “At Our Potatoes,” 62–69.

⁴⁴ See Lady Morgan, *O’Donnel*, vol. 1 (London, 1814), 280–87. For Morgan’s account of her dining at the Paris restaurant, Beauvilliers, and her attendance at a dinner cooked by Antoine Carême, see Morgan, *Lady Morgan in France*, ed. Elizabeth Suddaby and P. J. Yarrow (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Oriel Press, 1971), 84 and 233–239..

⁴⁵ Trish Deseine, *Home: Recipes from Ireland* (Paris: Hachette Cuisine, 2015).

⁴⁶ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127.

⁴⁷ Wilde, ‘The Food of the Irish’, 127. By contrast, Cullen claims that Irish diet was in fact quite varied and “in its way ... rich.” Cullen, *Emergence of Modern Ireland*, 168.

⁴⁸ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127.

⁴⁹ Somewhat unconvincingly, Wilde adds that, on occasion, the salt herring would be hung from the chimney brace and that each drop “was received upon the mealy mouthful by every individual in succession.” Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 128.

⁵⁰ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 128.

⁵¹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process*, vol. 1, *The History of Manners* (1969; Oxford, Blackwell, 1978). See also Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

⁵² Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127.

⁵³ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 127–8.

⁵⁴ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 130.

⁵⁵ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 129.

⁵⁶ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 129.

⁵⁷ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 130.

⁵⁸ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 130.

⁵⁹ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 133.

⁶⁰ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 133–34.

⁶¹ Wilde, “The Food of the Irish,” 134.

⁶² Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 116.

⁶³ Gay, “Accounting for Catastrophe,” 64.

⁶⁴ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 118.